

Minutes
Regular meeting of the City of Reading Planning Commission
July 22, 2014 at 7:00 pm

Members present:

Ermete J. Raffaelli, Chairman
Brian J. Burket, Vice Chairman
Michael E. Lauter, Secretary
Wayne Jonas Bealer, Assistant Secretary

Staff present:

Andrew W. Miller, Planning Office
Deborah A.S. Hoag, Department of Public Works

Others present:

Edward J. Walsh IV, McCarthy Engineering Associates Inc.
Brian S. Focht, Van Cleef Engineering Associates LLC
Domenico Brutto, Mimmo's Restaurant & Pizzeria

Chairman Raffaelli called the July meeting to order, and asked for acceptance of the agenda. Mr. Miller, having distributed an updated and already *outdated* agenda, explained that the 'Homes at Riverside' plan was again withdrawn, late that day. He said a request for an extension will be presented instead. Mr. Burket moved to accept the July 22nd agenda, as further modified. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to accept the revised July agenda.

Subdivision and Land Development:

120 & 122 Belvedere Avenue – final land development plan [0:01.27]

Mr. Walsh briefly described the project's location, and its scope; a total of two attached dwelling units. He said they'd received a couple reviews. He noted that the site had been approved 'a long time ago' as two building lots and, though evidence suggests a prior building thereon, they hadn't established the prior use definitively. He said zoning permits were granted. Mr. Raffaelli asked for architectural elevations. Mr. Walsh had none. Asked about the construction of the dividing (party) wall, he answered 'masonry'. Mr. Raffaelli asked about the façade materials. Mr. Walsh said he hadn't seen the developer's building plans, but understood their intent to 'fit the character' of the neighborhood. He said they were submitted with the zoning application. Ms. Hoag mentioned receiving some herself. Mr. Raffaelli pressed for elevation drawings. Mr. Miller said it was requested in his initial review. He said the plan has been under review and revision for a few months, and that the project manager had preferred to postpone the presentation until all the technical issues had been resolved. He commended that approach, but realized it denied the Commission any advance opportunity to consider the proposal. Mr. Burket asked if they could describe the layout and appearance in any further detail. Mr. Walsh mentioned siding along the sides of the homes, unsure about the treatment of the front facades. He said they'll each measure 13.67 feet in width, 40 feet in length, with two bedrooms and one-and-a-half baths, for sale, on 20-foot-wide lots. About the off-street parking, he proposed two spaces each, in stone (an inaccurate recollection of a construction detail that shows asphalt paving), in the rear yard and accessed from an alley that was once stone but has lately grown over in grass. He said the parking was requested by zoning, where they preferred the on-street availability. Asked if stone driveways were allowed, Mr. Miller recalled the Zoning Ordinance being changed to exempt single-family dwellings (a misinterpretation of the Zoning Ordinance's §600-1602.A, which authorizes it for 'lawful existing' conditions). He asked if the parking would be 'usable'. Mr. Walsh said 'yes', but doubted the likelihood of its use. Mr. Burket asked if anything would separate the parking spaces, such as a fence. Mr. Walsh said not, given the limited space. Mr. Raffaelli asked about the width of the neighboring homes. Mr. Walsh thought their proposal reflected an average, noting that some are even narrower. Mr. Bealer complimented the side yards provided. Mr. Walsh said they had initially considered one building on a combined lot, but the client preferred the 'attached' proposal. Mr. Bealer wondered about the prospect of improving the alley, and the required consent of the neighbors. Mr. Miller characterized it as a civil matter, where the City might not take a formal role or position. He assumed that whatever might have been required in off-street parking for the existing houses would be difficult to establish, and wondered about their willingness to share the cost. He said the closing or blocking of an alley is a bigger consideration and legal procedure. Mr. Lauter supported the concept of infill development reflecting the typical sizes found in the established neighborhood. Mr. Walsh referred to a plan from early 1920s that established the twenty-foot-lot pattern. He added the developer's ability to effectively market the homes as another primary consideration. Mr. Miller affirmed his satisfaction with the latest plan revisions, but for an error in the minimum

width for sidewalks, which he hoped to address with hand-written and initialed notes. He recommended approval based on the usual conditions; compliance with the latest staff reviews. Ms. Hoag referred to a stormwater runoff question from the Public Works review. Mr. Walsh said the roof leaders to the curb and additional spot elevations are now shown. Ms. Hoag confirmed that another issue regarding sanitary sewer documentation had since been settled.

Mr. Bealer moved to grant the final plan approval, based on its satisfying the terms of the latest Planning Office and Public Works reviews. Mr. Burket seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to conditionally approve the '120 & 122 Belvedere Avenue' final plan.

Resolution #16-2014

Mimmo's Restaurant Additions – final annexation and land development plan [0:27.04]

Mr. Focht described the almost 2500 square feet of additions, intended to accommodate additional seating areas, an entry vestibule, a porch and some storage space. He said the site currently exists as two separate parcels, which will be consolidated. He said the expansion will require additional parking; over 100 additional seats and as many as four new employees will be added to the current 130 seats and 17 employees. The total required was figured at 79 spaces, and 84 are proposed. He indicated the existing driveway, and a second curb cut to be closed for a new access aligned with UGI's driveway across Morgantown Road. He said their aim is to alleviate some of the congestion and improve the sight lines. A highway-occupancy application is being prepared for submission to the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT). 'No parking' signs will also be proposed along the Morgantown Road frontage. Mr. Burket asked how many spaces would be lost with that signage. Mr. Focht estimated eight or nine. Mr. Bealer assumed most of that parking to be UGI employees who should be using their own fenced lot. He recalled that they'd already eliminated the on-street parking from their side of the Road because of cars losing control on the curve. Mr. Focht said there had already been some discussion of allowing UGI's employees some limited use of the new Mimmo's parking lot. He said stormwater will be managed by a 'sheet flow' pattern toward the infiltration trench, underlain with perforated piping to be tied into an existing inlet. He said no curb was proposed for the interior of the parking lot, where grass islands and trees would supplement the stormwater measures. He said the existing utility services were adequate, although a sprinkler system would be added to the restaurant. It was mentioned that a new water lateral would likely be required. He said that will be shown on a revised plan. He said a sewer planning module would be submitted, once the existing flow and allocation was determined. He said solid waste management would continue as before, with storage in an existing dumpster, and the arrangements would be noted on the plan. He noted the Conservation District's approval of the erosion and sedimentation controls. Asked if the driveway would require a trench drain, he described the grading that would direct runoff to the sides and into the infiltration trench. Paraphrasing the County Planning review, Mr. Miller related their concerns about vehicles crossing/loading the infiltration trench, and a recommendation for wheel stops. He voiced a similar concern for the protection of the island trees within the parking area. He questioned the continuing access (easement) for the billboard owner. Mr. Brutto said they usually service it from the Road with a truck boom, though he occasionally allows them access through the property. Mr. Miller cautioned against the possible intrusion of the headlights shining from the parking area onto neighboring residential properties. Mr. Raffaelli preferred a buffer planting for that and for drivers on Morgantown Road. Mr. Burket asked about lighting proposed for the parking lot. Mr. Focht answered 'none'. Mr. Brutto mentioned the on-street (Met-Ed) lighting. Mr. Miller said the Zoning Ordinance only requires that parking areas be 'adequately' lit, and that the plan must show the details of anything proposed. Mr. Focht agreed, and referred to some additional lighting on the building. He showed some architectural elevations that included color renderings. Mr. Raffaelli recommended they demolish the existing house, for the financial and insurance benefits. Mr. Brutto said it will remain as the business office, with the upstairs continuing as a rented apartment. He said he'll eliminate an existing shed, on the Prospect Avenue side, in favor of a new integrated storage area, matching the rest of the building. Discussion continued on the challenges of exiting the existing parking area through its existing driveway, and the proposed improvements. Mr. Miller reported that they'd already attended a 'OneStopShop' meeting to begin discussion with the building officials. He asked if any changes were proposed for the existing driveway. Mr. Focht said not, but for a possible accessibility-related adjustment in the sidewalk transition. He said both the existing and proposed driveways will be documented in the highway-occupancy permitting. Asked about façade materials, Mr. Brutto described a combination of stucco and stone, with a clay shingle and rubber roof. Mr. Miller advised the Commission to defer its action until some of the other approvals were obtained. He complimented the initial effort. Ms. Hoag said they could expect the Public Works review within the next week.

Mr. Bealer moved to table the final plan, pending other required reviews and permits. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to table the 'Mimmo's Restaurant Additions' plan.

Other business:

§508.3 agreement to extension-Homes at Riverside [1:00.11]

Mr. Miller said they still hadn't received a zoning permit, and there remained unresolved questions over the engineering review. He said he received an email, that afternoon, requesting a 45-day extension of the Municipalities Planning Code deadline.

Mr. Bealer moved to extend the review of the Homes at Riverside plan by 45 days, as requested in a July 22nd email from the design engineer. Mr. Burket seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to approve a 45-day extension of the 'Homes at Riverside' preliminary plan.

Resolution #17-2014

modifications to the 'DoubleTree Hotel & Garage Project' record plan [1:02.30]

Mr. Miller provided the 2009 record plan and 2010 revision-to-record plan for the Commission's reference. Mr. Bealer noted the dominating brick pattern along Penn Street's sidewalks, including that on the opposite side of the Street in front of the Santander Arena. He was more open to considering changes to the landscaping. Mr. Miller explained that was their offer in an effort to treat a blank façade at the eastern end of the building, which was also to have clerestory windows that may have since been deleted. Mr. Lauter resisted the idea of featureless walls generally, and particularly in the commercial core. Mr. Miller debated their reasoning in making the request – liability and maintenance concerns – suggesting that the heat gain on the built, northern side of Penn Street will require even more attention to containerized plants. He thought it even more likely that the plants would die in the limited growing medium. He was less concerned with changes to the patterned (stamped concrete), unsure of their exact modifications, believing it to be limited to areas under the car port. Mr. Lauter referred to the text of a proposed Zoning Ordinance amendment, included with their meeting materials for the next matter being considered, which seemed to reinforce the idea of a downtown streetscape integrity, specifically forbidding long blank walls. Asked what exactly was being requested of the Commission, Mr. Miller explained that he had been asked to 'okay' the changes personally, but insisted on the Commission's input. He said the Commission didn't necessarily have to take any action, relying instead on the plan of record. Mr. Raffaelli didn't see any compelling reason to approve the change. Mr. Bealer opined that the Hotel was intended as an upscale operation, and deserves the extra amenities and maintenance. Mr. Lauter disputed the water penetration concerns, suggesting there are known solutions available to treat the adjacent walls. He recalled the Commission having been pushed for a number of other concessions during the initial planning, and preferred the plan approved as it better protects the character of the streetscape.

Mr. Raffaelli moved to deny the proposed changes, referring to the record land development plan, and downtown planning objectives established by the Comprehensive Plan and a number of supporting documents. Mr. Burket seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to refuse the streetscape changes to the DoubleTree Hotel plan.

Resolution #18-2014

§609.c review-proposed zoning ordinance restricting private parking in the Commercial Core [1:16.10]

Mr. Bealer requested a couple grammatical edits. Mr. Raffaelli recalled previous scenarios of downtown parking projects being considered against the Reading Parking Authority's interests, while noting the infrequent occurrence. Mr. Bealer noted the Public Library and Gateway Building projects, specifically. Mr. Miller added that the latter issue had been appealed to the Court of Common Pleas, unsure how the case was finally resolved. He thought the issue had been effectively settled, either through the City's lack of enforcement or by legal opinions casting doubt on the stricter policy. Having briefly compared the language to the current zoning regulations, he didn't recognize much policy difference between them. In its application, he believed his predecessors had allowed small lots as 'accessory' to the specific buildings and businesses they serve, but not the capacity for leasing parking to off-site tenants. Mr. Raffaelli mentioned the restrictions on new Penn Street driveway openings as a related issue. Mr. Bealer didn't see much difference himself, and reiterated it as: 'only the Authority should be in the business of renting parking'. Mr. Miller suggested that simpler language could achieve that end. He said City Council will likely hold its hearing and vote before the Commission meets again. He said the City Clerk had asked for some additional explanation from the Parking Authority, and an opinion from the City solicitors, but hadn't yet received either.

Mr. Bealer moved to advise City Council that the current Zoning Ordinance appears to cover the issue adequately, and unless the Law Department recommends specific clarifications, the Planning Commission supports a policy whereby the downtown 'pay-to-park' facilities remain the privilege of the Reading Parking Authority, with the current provisions/exceptions for private 'on-site' facilities serving the uses thereon. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to forward that position to City Council.

Resolution #19-2014

§303.a.1 review-petition for a stop sign at the intersection of West Greenwich and Tulpehocken [1:25.25]

Mr. Raffaelli felt such a review to be the province of traffic engineers, whether in-house or contracted. Ms. Hoag confirmed that it will require a traffic study to determine 'warrants'. Mr. Miller thought there might be another opportunity to consider the issue, and with the benefit of a study. Mr. Bealer mentioned a recent *WFMZ-TV* broadcast that noted the need for further investigation. Mr. Miller advised the Commission to voice any definite opinions, and otherwise defer to the forthcoming traffic study.

Mr. Lauter moved to recommend allowing the traffic engineers to study and determine the proper response to the petition. Mr. Bealer seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to communicate their deference to a formal study.

Resolution #20-2014

§303.a.1 review-Schuylkill River Trail alignment, the Riverfront Drive to Buttonwood Street gap [1:29.40]

Mr. Miller described the area being studied as a part of the Trail never made official. Mr. Bealer encouraged any upgrade to the section between the Yocum Library and the Schuylkill River. Mr. Miller noted the Schuylkill River Greenway Association and Berks Conservancy have not been able to negotiate a route through the Reading Area Community College's campus. He felt the more important questions pertained to changes in the topography of River Road and Front Street, and its bearing on the College's own planned alterations to Front Street. He said the Greenway Association is focused on the regional connectivity of the River Trail. It currently doesn't continue much further upstream. They are seeking the general support of the planning agency as they pursue support and funding. He thought that such a statement wouldn't confer the Planning Commission's endorsement of any specific option.

Mr. Lauter moved to support the concept, recognizing the need and encouraging the continued study and application for funding. Mr. Burket seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to support a planned Trail connection.

Resolution #21-2014

The Commission briefly discussed an Alvernia University effort to reconstruct and standardize the section of Saint Bernardine Street in Angelica Creek Park.

Mr. Raffaelli raised the possibility of a skateboarding park on some West Reading Borough-owned property within the City limits (on Old Wyomissing Road), as had been reported in a recent *Reading Eagle* newspaper article. The members considered its zoning classification, planned method of construction, the condition and popularity of existing facilities at the Stonecliffe Recreation Area, Pandora Park and at Hyde Park in Muhlenberg Township. Mr. Lauter said he'd always rather provide for such facilities if it spares the damage to the downtown buildings and monuments, though he wasn't necessarily supporting the intended location. Mr. Raffaelli cited the potential 'quality-of-life' issues in a residential area.

review the draft June 24, 2014 meeting minutes [1:46.20]

Mr. Lauter moved to accept the June meeting minutes, as presented. Mr. Burket seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to accept the June 24th meeting minutes.

Resolution #22-2014

Mr. Bealer reported that the Blighted Property Review Committee did not convene in the last month, but plans a certification hearing in the next. Asked if owners of blighted properties are allowed to transfer them, he said they are, and are supposed to disclose that encumbrance to the buyer. Mr. Burket asked if such a conveyance resets the time allowed for rehabilitation. Mr. Bealer said it does not. He also briefly explained some new statutory provisions (Act 90 of 2010) that provide an acquisition method alternate to eminent domain proceedings.

Mr. Lauter moved to adjourn the July meeting. Mr. Burket seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to adjourn the July 22nd meeting. - 8:51p